REPLY TO GEORGE HANDLEY AND THOMAS ALEXANDER

Richard Foltz

The response of Brigham Young University Professors Handley and Alexander to my article, "Mormon Values and the Utah Environment," reflects a very careless reading on their part and suggests that they have extremely biased agendas of their own. While virtually every statement in their critique is refuted within the article itself, several points may be addressed again here.

Handley and Alexander’s claim that they find my linking of Utah politics with the dominant religion to be “surprising” is, itself, surprising. The LDS Church’s stated position of political non-involvement is patently dishonest, and, especially in light of the pressure local bishops were recently required to put on their flocks to donate money to fight “gay marriage” bills in Hawaii and California, the claim is laughable. Utah legislators regularly boast to their constituencies that they consult Church authorities before voting on major bills. The LDS Church is about as apolitical as the Christian Coalition or the Moral Majority, whose values it shares to a considerable extent. Even if the Church’s stated position were tenable or valid, it does not in any way mitigate my assertion that as the primary actor in instilling cultural values the Church cannot but help having a powerful political effect in community where its followers comprise the vast majority.

Nowhere do I characterize Mormons as “anti-environmentalists” and non-Mormons as “environmentalists,” as Profs. Handley and Alexander assert. The paper is about Mormons and the positions they themselves have articulated, not about non-Mormons, environmentalist or otherwise. (Virtually all of the points of view cited in my article were from Mormon sources or informants.) Profs. Handley and Alexander accuse me of “poor and misleading scholarship,” incorrectly claiming that my article is based “more heavily on anecdotal newspaper reports and conversations than on available research...” Had they actually read my article they would have seen that I cite all the sources they mention. In fact after a year of research I was
forced to the despairing conclusion that I had found most of what the LDS tradition had put into print on the subject of environmental values and that a survey of it took less than twenty pages.

Nowhere do I “give credit to the LDS Church for every overt manifestation of anti-environmentalism in Utah,” as Profs. Handley and Alexander claim. But I will say that I have not seen a single case where the Church spoke out against a particular act of environmental despoliation, and it is perhaps not unreasonable to suggest that the Church’s silence in the face of so many ongoing destructive acts in Utah and elsewhere may well constitute a form of tacit consent. As I note in my article, the LDS Church is the only Christian denomination in the United States formally committed to policies of inaction on environmental issues. Given that overall environmental issues do not loom very large in either official or popular Mormon literature, the essays in \textit{New Genesis} do indeed appear “striking,” although Handley and Alexander fail to note that I cite a number of earlier Mormon environmentalist writings as well, including scriptural sources. According to the editors of \textit{New Genesis}, as of two years after its publication it had not been reviewed or even mentioned in any official or unofficial LDS publications. Apparently the message it contains does not resonate very strongly with the general Mormon reading public.

Nor do I conclude, as Handley and Alexander assert, that the “prevailing disregard for Creation,” as they put it, “derives from Mormon belief.” In fact I demonstrated precisely the opposite, that Mormon tradition does enjoin respect for Creation. The question I presented was one which has repeatedly been posed by environmentally-sensitive Mormons, namely, why it might be that by and large neither the majority of Mormons nor the contemporary leaders of the Church are allowing that respect to inform their lives today or the decisions they make as individuals and as a community.

Handley and Alexander’s introduction of Berkhofer’s critique is misplaced, since the ideals which, as they say, are not met by practice, are shown in my article to be the purported ideals of Mormonism itself and not those of another group. And if a community’s ideals are deemed to be excused from responsibility for, and therefore irrelevant to that community’s practice, then it may be asked what ideals are for in the first place. I do not equate “prevailing political or cultural views in Utah as necessarily having a sound doctrinal basis and